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Atlas Shrugged and Quo Vadis

Kurt Keefner

In her discussion of Romantic literature, Ayn Rand ([1969] 1975, 107) names Victor Hugo as its greatest exponent and Henryk Sienkiewicz's book *Quo Vadis* ([1896] 1993) and Nathaniel Hawthorne's book *The Scarlet Letter* as its greatest examples. Examination reveals that in *Atlas Shrugged* Rand deliberately borrowed from *Quo Vadis* in an attempt to rewrite it more in line with her philosophical values.

Quo Vadis tells the story of a Roman army officer, Marcus Vinicius, serving under Nero. He falls in love with a young foreign princess named Ligia, who lives with a noble Roman family. He has to have her. Vinicius's uncle, Gaius Petronius, is one of Nero's chief courtiers. He is a clever, amoral, hedonistic and secretly contemptuous of the mountebank emperor. Wanting to help his nephew, who is perhaps the only person in the world whom he loves, he concocts a plan to have Nero remove Ligia from her house and take her to the imperial palace, then to give her to Vinicius.

The plan is carried out but Ligia is revolted by the decadence of a Neronian dinner party and by Vinicius's drunken advances, and she makes a daring escape with her giant bodyguard Ursus. Having her slip from his grasp drives Vinicius wild, and the chase is on. The central dynamic of the story is that Vinicius's lust and later love for Ligia cause him to go deeper and deeper into her world. The twist is: she's a Christian.

The central conflict of the novel is Christianity (as represented by the pure Ligia and the earnest apostle Peter) versus pagan, brutal, worldly Rome (as represented at first by Vinicius and Petronius but

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later more by the monstrous Nero). Although Rand (2000, 16) did not agree with Christianity being the “hero” of *Quo Vadis*, she would presumably have objected to the Roman corruption portrayed in the novel as well.

It is highly probable that Rand read *Quo Vadis* before writing *The Fountainhead*, much less *Atlas Shrugged*, because she has Austen Heller in *The Fountainhead* refer to Gail Wynand as “Petronius from Hell’s Kitchen” (Rand 1943, 108).¹ Petronius is clearly a model for Wynand; they share an elegant figure, a love of art and a casual detachment born of natural superiority. And they are both sardonic. Wynand is *not* Petronius in that Wynand is a power-seeker and therefore a kind of second-hander, which Petronius most definitely is not. Furthermore, Petronius shows no sign of wishing to break men of independent spirit.

In any event, the similarities between *Quo Vadis* and *Atlas Shrugged* are far too many and too deep for *Quo Vadis* to have been merely the object of Rand’s technical admiration. We need to examine the particulars and ascertain her intentions. The fundamental similarity is that both novels are about idealistic movements in their early stage of development. Both concern small groups operating at least partly in secret under the nose of a potentially hostile society. Rand changed the otherworldly Christianity of Sienkiewicz’s group into rational egoism, thereby preserving the romance of the small, struggling, idealistic band, while excising the features she objected to.

The two movements are also largely non-violent. Ragnar Danneskjöld in *Atlas Shrugged* is a pirate to be sure, but his is not the method of the strikers as a whole. Like the early Christians, they seek acceptance by persuasion and are not after the violent overthrow of society. Galt—like Christ, the perfect man, combined with Peter, the fisher of souls—goes out with his apostle Francisco in search of converts.

One aspect of Christianity that Rand retained was the importance of sacrifice. “Sacrifice” gets a lot of bad press among Rand’s followers because of her definition of it as the surrender of a more important value for a lesser value (Rand 1957, 953–54). Nobody else, except possibly Immanuel Kant, uses the term in that way. The

relevant definition in the realm of morality is the surrender of a precious value for the sake of a more precious value. In other words, one values something so highly that one is willing to endure a painful loss to gain or keep it. An example would be a mother who rescues her children out of a burning car at cost of injury to herself. Rand regarded sacrifice as if it were a correlate of altruism, but in common parlance, it clearly is not. Some sacrifice is altruistic, if the more precious value to the actor is the good of others per se, but most sacrifice is not, even if it is misguided (as in the case of religious sacrifice). Submitting to torture rather than recanting and (in your own estimation) losing your soul is gravely mistaken, but it is not altruistic. This kind of action is precisely what the sacrifices of *Quo Vadis* consist of.

Rand did believe that sacrifice could be a virtue, even if she did not call it by its right name, because she believed that life, to a significant degree, consists of struggle and that idealism demands hard choices. Although she did not believe in a tragic worldview, she did believe that there are tragic situations in life and that they are a legitimate subject of art. Judging from the trials she put the characters in her novels through, Rand thought that struggle, tragedy and sacrifice make good drama. For Sienkiewicz, it is the surrender of the patently real for the “benefits” of a fable. For Rand, it is the surrender of real-world values for more important real-world values. Life here on earth, not as imagined in Heaven, is the standard of Rand’s version of sacrifice and, for her, the universe is ultimately benevolent, so that sacrifice is the exception, not the rule.

Although Galt is nearly crucified by the looter government, the chief example of sacrifice in *Atlas Shrugged* is Francisco d’Anconia. Francisco gives up everything the world he was born into has to offer: his industrial empire, as he secretly destroys d’Anconia Copper; his public personae, as he pretends to be a playboy; and Dagny, whom he believes (in one of the novel’s great improbabilities) could not give up her world for the strike. That’s why Francisco has to start out so superior—it gives him more to lose—and that’s why he ends up at least temporarily in a “log cabin beaten in dark streaks by the tears of many rains” (677).

And then when Rearden slaps him, Francisco, who usually makes himself look like Petronius in order to fool the world, faces a moment of temptation. Like Vinicius struggling not to revert to his pagan ways, he has to fight off the urge to kill Rearden. He seems to see a vision, like an extra person standing in the room with him and he thinks: "If this is what you demand of me, then even this is yours, yours to accept and mine to endure, there is no more than this in me to offer you, but let me be proud to know I can offer so much" (598). Francisco is literally imagining Galt, but metaphorically, he's having a vision, like Christians seeing Christ. This is clearly an act of renunciation or sacrifice—sacrifice in the proper sense of the word, meaning the surrender of something precious for the sake of something more precious—an act of devotion. Note also that Francisco is supposed to look like a Roman, not a Latin American (116). Moreover, Francisco compares his "artistry" in arranging the San Sebastián Mines disaster to that of Nero burning down Rome (121).

Another similarity Rand draws with *Quo Vadis* is the use of a symbol to stand for the nascent movement. No doubt everyone has seen the little fish symbol on the backs of automobiles, and everyone probably knows it's a Christian symbol going back to antiquity. It's actually rather clever: a rebus of an acronym. If you take the initials of the Greek for Jesus Christ, Son of God and Savior, you get ICHTHOS, which means "fish" (Sienkiewicz [1896] 1993, 138).

As portrayed by Sienkiewicz, the fish symbol was a prominent feature of early Christianity. It became a secret way of people saying "I am a Christian, are you?" or of marking meeting places, etc. This secrecy was necessary because even before the Christians were actively persecuted, they were disliked by the Romans who did not understand the new religion and who could never tolerate a religion unwilling to melt into the common pot.

The role of the fish in *Quo Vadis* is reminiscent of that of the dollar sign in *Atlas Shrugged*, which also symbolized a movement. Rand does not have the strikers use it as code for themselves, except for the pack of dollar sign cigarettes passed to Galt while he is held prisoner, but they do use it as a private icon to remind themselves of

their true homeland (Rand 1957, 638).²

A second commonality between the two symbols is that they are both based on initials, the fish on ICHTHOS and the dollar sign, according to Owen Kellogg, on the U.S. (United States), both something holy in the eyes of the respective movements (637). (Although Kellogg's account is probably apocryphal.)

Third, it is a symbol that Dagny follows in search of the Destroyer, much as Vinicius follows the fish in search of Ligia, trying to figure out what it means and who are the mysterious people who use the symbol.

This pursuit is the greatest plot similarity between the two novels. Each chase forms a major story line in its novel. Vinicius and Dagny share a love/hate relationship with the object of their hunt. I don't mean typical ambivalence, but that Vinicius loves Ligia and (at first) has contempt for the Christians, while Dagny hates "the Destroyer" but loves the man she does not know him to be. This is a way for both authors to increase the tension. Vinicius and Dagny are both injured in their pursuit and are held as quasi-prisoners of the movements in question.³ Lastly, during their captivity, both come to see that although they are not ready to sign up, they must concede that the Christians/strikers are good if mistaken people.

Rand was not content to ape Sienkiewicz; she sought to improve upon him. Dagny's pursuit of Galt is more dramatic because her love and hate of him are more complex than Vinicius's love of Ligia and hatred of the Christians. In general, Dagny is a more complex figure than Vinicius, who is rather two-dimensional. Rand makes the quasi-captivity sequence more dramatic and meaningful by inserting ideological speeches (speeches are a necessary part of the portrayal of a strike and not a literary excess as some of Rand's critics have maintained). Finally, Rand makes Dagny's inner conflict over the strike more intense by having her agree with the strikers on fundamentals.⁴ On the other hand, Vinicius is a conventional figure and only stubbornness and habit keep him from embracing Christianity sooner.

Rand manifestly borrowed from *Quo Vadis*. The real question is: What was her intention in doing so? Was she paying homage?

Perhaps, but homage is usually paid with one or two references, such as Wynand being compared to Petronius. Was she playing a sly joke by making Sienkiewicz's religious novel serve atheist ends? That is a rather long way to go for a joke, and Rand was not known for her sense of humor. Was she just being lazy, borrowing instead of creating? Not only is that uncharitable to the extreme, but it is undermined by the fact that Rand surely knew that someone would eventually pick up on the similarities. *Quo Vadis* was a worldwide best-seller at the turn of the twentieth century, an established classic that was filmed four times prior to the publication of *Atlas Shrugged*, once in English as a blockbuster MGM epic in 1951, while Rand was writing her novel. Whatever her intention, it could not have involved secrecy, as mere cribbing would.

It is clear from what she said and did that Rand loved *Quo Vadis*. It seems to have spoken to her deeply because of its romanticism and its setting in one of Rome's corrupt periods. Rand, according to Barbara Branden (1986, 302), saw herself as living in the last days of the Roman Empire. But Rand sometimes objected to the novel's Christian subject and theme—not only ideological objections but objections to the way Christianity weakened the story. So in order to create a new and better account of a new and better movement, Rand undertook to perfect *Quo Vadis*, by incorporating significant elements of it into the world of *Atlas Shrugged*. This was done not only because she wanted to improve *Quo Vadis* as such, but because she saw herself as living in a time of decline that needed a new movement to save it. From that point of view, it is not a mere novel that Rand was rewriting, but Christianity itself.

One more example of Rand's improvement of Christianity comes in that dramatic scene where Rearden slaps Francisco, but before Rearden enters Dagny's apartment. Speaking of the ideal man they both "serve," Francisco says to Dagny, "we were taught that some things belong to God and others to Caesar. Perhaps their God would permit it. But the man you say we're serving—he does not permit it. He permits no divided allegiance, no war between your mind and your body, no gulf between your values and your actions, no tributes to Caesar. He permits no Caesar" (Rand 1957, 594).

This is Rand's position in brief about Christianity: she'll keep the ideal man, but not the otherworldliness. As a corollary, neither will she accept a "master of the world" like Nero, who makes being this-worldly unattractive.

Let me emphasize that I do not mean that *Atlas Shrugged* is a mere "retread" of *Quo Vadis*. The two novels are more significantly different than they are significantly the same. But they *are* significantly the same, and the evidence points to Rand writing these similarities deliberately and probably in the hope that someone would detect her intention. Despite her tendency to self-quotation, Rand did not spill much ink interpreting her own novels. She clearly wanted other people to do so.

Are there other examples of Rand rewriting authors she loved? Future scholarship will have to decide.

Notes

1. We must allow that Rand might have referred to the real Petronius, author of the *Satyricon*, although Rand never exhibited any mastery of literature prior to the nineteenth century.

2. Owen Kellogg speaking to Dagny Taggart.

3. See especially Sienkiewicz [1896] 1993, chapters 30 through 34, and Rand 1957, part 3, chapters 1 and 2.

4. Rand never wrote a story about a hero undergoing fundamental change. All of her heroes are formed for life by the age of 12. All their growth comes from changing applications of their principles. The one exception to this rule is Rearden's mistaken partial embrace of the mind-body dichotomy.

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